Dowdy Trial Dazzled by 'Spellbinder'

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When Leonard R. Wilson was leading the efforts to oust the first black student the University of Alabama in 1956, a Washington newspaper described him as a "spellbinder with all the poise and delivery of a seasoned evangelist."

That poise and delivery were in evidence again two days ago when Wilson told a federal jury in Baltimore that he had been with Rep. John Dowdy (D-Tex.) at the exact time the government says Dowdy received a $25,000 bribe—and that he did not see anyone hand the Congressman anything.

Wilson, never mentioned previously in connection with the Dowdy case, directly contradicted testimony of government witnesses and clearly caught federal prosecutors off guard. His testimony sent them scurrying to try to dig up information to use against him on cross-examination when the trial resumes Monday.

Wilson is under instructions from the court not to talk to reporters, but from contacts with various sources the following picture of Wilson emerges:

Wilson, now 35, has been associated with various segregationist and conservative causes since being expelled from the University of Alabama for allegedly leading a mob that was demanding the expulsion of Autherine J. Lucy in 1956.

Miss Lucy, the first Negro to attend the university, subsequently was expelled for "disciplinary reasons" and Wilson was quick to take the credit.

Shortly thereafter, Wilson signed on with the White Citizens Council of Alabama, a white supremacist organization that since has dropped the "white" from its title. Wilson testified he served as executive secretary of that organization for eight years and held that post at the time he met Dowdy in an Atlanta airport on Sept. 22, 1965.

It was on that date and in that place, the government charged, that Myrvin C. Clark, a former home improvement company official, passed a briefcase containing $25,000 in cash to Dowdy.

Wilson said he had met Dowdy, who was waiting at the airport for a plane to Texas, in order to pass on to him a $500 campaign contribution from the late Wallace Malone, a Dothan, Ala., banker.

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WITNESS, From B1

Malone, records show was a former state legislator and a member of the policy board of the Liberty Lobby, a right-wing organization that has contributed more than $20,000 to Dowdy's legal defense fund.

In 1966, Wilson assumed new duties with the Citizens Council as field director for Alabama and Georgia. During his years with the Citizens Council, he wrote several articles for "The Citizen," the official magazine of the Citizens Council of America.

In 1968, Wilson ran unsuccessfully for the Alabama State Senate. In 1970, he again unsuccessfully sought political office, this time running on a prosegregationist ticket for a seat on the executive committee of the Alabama Democratic Party.

A resident of Jasper, Ala., Wilson testified he is selling house trailers for a living. A Jasper newspaperman described Wilson as "well-to-do" because of various business, real estate and farming enterprises.

Dowdy's lawyers have argued that the acceptance of the alleged bribe never happened. The existence of a witness who could corroborate that assertion was unknown to the government and the press until Thursday, but the Liberty Lobby has known about Wilson for more than a year, a spokesman said yesterday.

"We felt from the very beginning that Mr. Dowdy was innocent," said Warren Richardson, the organization's general counsel. "We know this witness was coming down the pike more than a year ago—and there's more to come."